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Community Leaders Challenge Lansing City Council Vote Against Affordable Housing

Housing Advocates, Pastors Call on City Council to Reverse Course at Next Monday Night's Meeting

Federal Complaint Will Seek Investigation of Possible Violations of Fair Housing Act

(LANSING) – Community leaders gathered at the city's Neighborhood Empowerment Center this morning to challenge the Lansing City Council's recent vote against a proposed housing development in Old Town. The \$5.7 million, mixed-use project proposed by Saboury Development would have transformed an abandoned warehouse in Old Town into 5,000 square feet of new commercial/retail space and 23 units of affordable workforce housing for individuals and families.

The Lansing City Council on March 28 rejected Saboury's request for a four percent Payment in Lieu of Taxes (PILOT) for the project, which was needed to enhance the prospect of securing Low Income Housing Tax Credits (LIHTC) from the Michigan State Housing and Development Authority. LIHTC's are critical in connecting private equity investment to the production of affordable housing throughout the United States. Council members Judi Brown Clarke, Jody Washington, Adam Hussain and Carol Wood all voted against the proposal.

Julie Powers, executive director of the Greater Lansing Housing Coalition, said the City Council's 4-4 vote against the Saboury PILOT may constitute illegal discrimination against low-income individuals and families, especially people of color. She noted that a formal complaint is in the process of being filed with the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) requesting a federal investigation of the City Council's actions with regard to affordable housing. She also noted that Tom Lapka, legal counsel for Saboury Development, is currently researching all possible legal remedies for his client.

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“It is very disappointing that several members of City Council voted against housing that individuals and families of modest means can afford because it will be located in one of the most vibrant areas in town,” Powers said. “If they voted ‘no’ because they think poor people shouldn’t be allowed to live in Old Town, they may be facing serious questions from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, and rightfully so.”

Reverend Dr. Melvin T. Jones of Union Missionary Baptist Church in Lansing expressed concerns on behalf of the Lansing Clergy Forum over the City Council’s recent moves to reject and even prohibit affordable housing in the city. He called on Council to reconsider and reverse their vote against the Saboury project at their next meeting.

“We believe very strongly -- and with unanimity -- that a moratorium on affordable housing will result in disparate outcomes and negative impacts on low-income families who are already struggling to find quality, affordable housing in Lansing,” Rev. Dr. Jones said. “The notion that people who are working toward economic advancement and personal empowerment should be relegated to the poor side of town is distasteful at best, and quite offensive at worst. We in the pastoral community join the other stakeholders and advocates represented here today in calling for the City Council to reconsider and reverse their decision as soon as possible. We will not stand on the sidelines while injustice is served.”

Located at 1119 N. Washington Avenue in Old Town, the Saboury project would have created 23 apartments for individuals and families. Income limits would have ranged from \$13,850 for a single person and up to \$39,480 for a family of four.

“Affordable housing belongs in Old Town as much as it does anywhere else in this city,” said Mayor Virg Bernero. “Several Council members apparently believe that low-income families can’t afford to eat at the restaurants or shop at the stores in Old Town, so they shouldn’t be allowed to live there, either. That’s an outrageous and unacceptable position for elected officials to take.”

“I want to commend and thank Councilmembers Kathy Dunbar, Patricia Spitzley, Jessica Yorko and Tina Houghton for voting in favor of this important project and for clearly demonstrating their commitment to fair housing for all people, regardless of race or income level,” Bernero said. “That’s called leadership.”

“I call on Council President Brown Clarke to reverse course and turn away from this ugly, dangerous and divisive path immediately. I call on her as Council president to lead her colleagues down the path of inclusion, fairness and justice - not just for some Lansing residents, but for all. That’s how we do it in Lansing. And that’s the America I want to live in,” Bernero concluded.

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